

The Village Sporting Scene

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(Article from *A Miscellany of Merriott Memories*)

The marathon and pram race might have had their moment of glory but it is football that has played the leading role in the sporting life of the village. It all began over one hundred years ago, in August 1910 when the club was first formed. They played in a field up at Shutteroaks. Access to the field for spectators was via a flight of stone steps leading up the steep bank from the crossroads. My father played for the village team in its very first year, at right half, as the position used to be known.



Merriott FC 1910-11. Photograph taken in a field known as Close, with Shyners Terrace in the background

The club registered its first major success in 1925, when Merriott reached the final of the Crewkerne Hospital Cup but lost to Ilminster 2-1 in front of a crowd of 2500 people - no, that's not a typo, 2500 people! - the match being played at Roundham. By that time my father was no longer a player although he was still associated with the club, probably as a committee member. (Incidentally, Hospital Cup competitions raised funds for local hospitals in pre-NHS days.)

My first memory of village football is my father taking me to a game played in a field we knew as Close, in Lower Street, where Manor Close is now. I was only five or six years old and not at all interested in the game, only in the plateful of orange segments handed out to the players at half time. No, they didn't offer me a piece.

The near success against Ilminster, and the success of a youth side who won the County Shield in 1939, was still being talked about when I started to become interested in football, but by now there was a war on, players were away in the forces and so the local competitions were suspended. Add to that, leather footballs with rubber inner tubes were unobtainable and



Crewkerne Hospital Cup finalists 1924-25

so any skills that my generation originally developed were courtesy of kicking a tennis ball around, usually in the street.

In 1946, it all started up again and the village team now played on the recreation field. By this time I was working as an oil boy for Mr Chedzoy on Saturdays (see earlier article) and couldn't go to the matches. But when Mr Chedzoy stopped outside Frank Paull's farm, it being a one-house stop and therefore nothing for me to do, I was able to run up to the road, peer over the recreation ground fence and get a glimpse of the action, all the time keeping an eye on Mr Chedzoy and returning to my work as soon as he moved on to the next stop at Newchester Cross.

About that time I remember the thrill I got from looking at the Perry Street and District League tables published in the *County Mail* - generally known as the *Fly Sheet* - every



Merriott FC 1946-4. Most of these men had just returned from war service. For a while these chaps were my footballing heroes

Wednesday and seeing Merriott's latest league position. They were at the time quite a good side, did quite well in the league and also reached the final of the Crewkerne Hospital Cup again. The final against Ilminster was played in Crewkerne on Easter Monday and was watched by 2000 people, including me, but the village team lost 3-0.

I have already mentioned in an earlier article the part a newcomer to the village, Mr Manning, played in setting up a youth club. He was also for a number of years the secretary of the football club and in particular organised a youth football team in which I played. We played in the Perry Street and District Youth League and were quite successful. We were runners up in the 1950/51 season and went on to win the league in 1951/52.

After reaching the age when playing for the under-18 youth team was no longer possible, my interest in football and my ability to play the game well seemed to tail off. I occasionally played for the village 1st XI and also the reserve team but I guess the big time just wasn't for me. So, from football to bowls, a somewhat unusual transition admittedly.



Merriott Youth Team 1952-53. Mr Manning is on the far right

Football was essentially a winter game in those days, the season being much shorter than it is now. In the summer there was very little sporting activity in the village - no football, no cricket, no tennis, no swimming. But there was bowls.

Although the bowls club was founded back in the 1920s, I can't recall it being active during the war years although it might have been, but I clearly remember the green being refurbished in the early 1950s. My father was working for Scott's Nurseries, who carried out the refurbishment, at the time and was involved with the work.

So, in the early 1950s I tried my hand at bowls, as did several other lads of my age. We were encouraged to do so by Sam Burgess, a near neighbour of mine. At that time, apart from being the Honorary Secretary of the club, he was also grounds man and gardener, voluntarily maintaining the green in seemingly pristine condition and ensuring the flower bed bordering the road was a blaze of colour all through the summer - I have never forgotten his displays of Sweet Williams.

Recently the club acquired a new clubhouse. The old one, built in 1934, had fallen into disrepair. It was hardly a clubhouse though, more a pavilion.

Few people back then possessed their own bowls or special bowling shoes. Instead, sets of bowls, and also slip-on over-shoes, that anyone could use were stored in racks around the pavilion walls. And no-one wore the blazers and ties that give today's game such a frumpish, old-folk image and is so off-putting for younger people. It was much more informal.

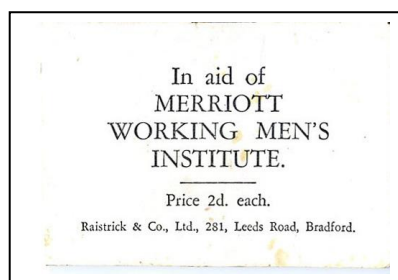
My moment of bowling glory came when I reached the final of the Novices' Cup. In the final, I had to play Clifford Foot. He was older than me, in his early thirties perhaps. As the game progressed, I felt sorry for him, being beaten by a slip of a lad. Lacking the killer instinct, I eased back and consequently he won.



Clifford Foot is presented with the Novices' Cup 1954, whilst I look on

Now, I'm not sure if billiards and snooker count as sport but according to today's TV schedules it does and so it seems appropriate to recall that there was a time when I spent many a winter evening down at the Working Men's Institute with my teenage friends playing billiards or snooker. The facilities on offer at that time were pretty limited, just two tables, their use controlled by newly installed sixpence-in-the-slot machines permitting exactly 30 minutes play before the table lights went out. For us youngsters, I think it was very much a leisure activity rather than a sport. We developed a fair degree of skill in relation to each other, were quite competitive and even entered club competitions but I don't recall any of us progressing very far.

I have one small memento associated with the Institute, a small fund-raising calendar-diary for 1940. It measures just 1" x 1.5". The front and rear covers are shown here. Inside are the outbreak of war speeches broadcast to the nation on September 3rd 1939 by George V, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and the Deputy Leader of the Opposition, Arthur Greenwood, a unique reminder of very momentous times.



Institute fund-raising diary

